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*Gospel, Law, and Redemptive History:  
"Trust and Obey"*



*P. Andrew Sandlin*

*When we walk with the Lord  
In the light of His Word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will  
He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.  
Trust and obey—  
For there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus  
But to trust and obey.*

*T*hese are lyrics from the popular Victorian hymn, "Trust and Obey," by John Sammis and Daniel Towner. They simply, but beautifully, portray the Biblical view of the unity of belief and ethics.

This article briefly addresses the picture the Bible gives us of the relation between faith, obedience and eternal life. We Protestants, for both historical and polemical, and not only exegetical and theological reasons, have often come to reduce this relation to the shorthand of "gospel-law." This is understandable, given how the issues have developed historically. I suggest, however, that in the Bible itself, the relation between gospel and law is a subset of a more basic relation between

*T*he obedience of God's people, consisting in their fidelity to his covenant with them, is the product of a prior belief in his person and trust in his word. Far from being a quest for meritorious self-justification, faith's obedience is the appropriate response of Israel, the covenant partner, to the election, grace and mercy of God.

**DON B. GARLINGTON**  
*(THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH, 233)*

*E*ssentially the New Perspective represents a "reformation" of a few notions Christians have inherited primarily from the Protestant Reformation. The New Perspective however is not a return to pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism, but an attempt to interpret Paul in his own context, apart from the categories and issues of the sixteenth century.

**MICHAEL B. THOMPSON**  
*(THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL, 4)*

faith, obedience and eternal life.<sup>1</sup> So, I will try first to take up this broader issue and deal subsequently with the gospel and law matter.

### THE BIBLE TRUMPS TRADITION

The interpretation I offer swerves at points from certain traditional categories. This fact should not be unduly troubling. We Protestants affirm the Bible, not tradition, as the final authority for what we believe and teach and practice.

This does not mean that we may disparage tradition, which is a vital part of our faith.<sup>2</sup> Tradition is, in any case, inescapable.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, each of us should be a strong proponent of ancient catholic orthodoxy, an outline of the basic historical tenets of the faith enshrined in the early ecumenical creeds.<sup>4</sup> As Protestants, we must preserve tradition, as long as it can be Biblically justified—this is just what the early Reformers believed (Here is a tradition we can hold onto!).<sup>5</sup>

It is easy, however, to read the Bible through the lens of 2000 years of subsequent interpretation. When we do this, categories that have become prominent in our minds as a result of past controversies intrude into our interpretation of the Bible itself. I believe this is often the case with the gospel-law scheme. We just cannot seem to get late medieval soteriology, or the Reformation, or Arminianism, off our minds when we read the Bible. But we must at least *try* to get them off our minds and read the Bible—not just exegetically but also theologically—in light of its own history and categories. From time to time, the Church must go back and evaluate its tradition, including its traditional theological views, and revise them if it judges them not in line with the Scriptures.

This reevaluation often happens when new circumstances emerge that force us back to the Bible. We know that earlier understandings of the Bible were influenced by fallible historical factors: a Platonic view of the world influenced the ancient Church, the Aristotelian scholastic tradition shaped medieval theology, animosity toward Rome sparked aspects of Reformation doctrine, and so on.<sup>6</sup> The Bible is infallible, but these and other historical factors that influence our theology are not

infallible.<sup>7</sup> A rigorous Biblical theology requires questioning of even long-cherished theological categories.<sup>8</sup>

This makes for exciting theology. Under the pressure of new historical circumstances, we sometimes see things in the Bible in a new light—or even things we never really seem to have seen before.

In short, tradition must eventually give way to the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Few theologians have said it as effectively and succinctly as Ned Stonehouse:

[T]he distinction between Scripture and tradition must prevent us from absolutizing tradition. No matter how high our estimate of the scriptural significance of any phase of history, including for example the Reformation, we may not make the judgments and practices of any phase our starting point for our evaluations of truth or our standard concerning it.<sup>10</sup>

No theology or its tradition is infallible, and mine surely is not. Only the Bible is infallible. Theology is, after all, a human enterprise (God doesn't "do" theology).<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Van Til was right, I believe, to hold that "the church's restatement of this revealed system of truth is a reworking of the system of truth in Scripture. It cannot therefore claim to be of the same authority as the system of the Bible."<sup>12</sup> Every theology is a human reflection on the data of the Bible; it is a creaturely enterprise, and it is subject to error.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, we must press forward, submitting ourselves anew to the Word of God.

### THE UNITY OF THE MESSAGE

I believe that the Bible presents at root one gospel, one law, one salvation, one ethic, one hope, one faith, all ensconced in one message. This puts me at odds with both traditional dispensationalism and traditional covenant theology.<sup>14</sup> *There is no fundamental gospel-law distinction.* I do not, of course, hold that the Bible's message is a flat revelation without any internal theological progress, and I do not advocate that dreaded "wooden hermeneutic," insensitivity to the historical and theological context. I believe that the beginning of the Biblical revelation is a seed, out of which the entire plant

flowers with the arrival of Jesus. However, I do not believe that this progress of revelation entails two or more basic, conflicting messages.

While I hold, therefore, that this message has expanded both in scope and content over the period of human history and God's dealings with humanity, I believe it is all of a single cloth, and that, when all of the evidence is presented, it all basically hangs together as one homogeneous unit. I surely do not deny there are difficulties with this view, but I do believe it suffers from fewer difficulties than various alternatives.

The immediate countering response is that this notion may threaten a totally gracious soteriology, which I enthusiastically affirm—salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I dispute this charge. I hold fervently to individual (and communal) salvation accomplished and applied wholly by God in Christ in redemptive history; but I am quite convinced that a rigid gospel-law distinction does not serve this gracious soteriology very well. Indeed, I posit (and will attempt to show) that, in some cases, a rigid gospel-law distinction may actually *threaten* salvation by grace.

It is imperative to begin at the beginning, prior to redemptive history.

### THE PRELAPSARIAN ERA

*Eden.* In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve that they could eat of all the trees except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). We also know that if they ate of the tree of life, they would have lived forever—or gained eternal life (Genesis 3:22). I do not believe this has anything to do with what is traditionally termed a prelapsarian (or pre-Fall) “covenant of works”:<sup>15</sup> that eternal life was something man was rewarded as merit for his obedience. Before the Fall, this view alleges, man was to merit eternal life and afterward Christ must merit it for us. I disagree with Charles Hodge when he asserts that the Bible presents *two* ways of gaining eternal life, one by works and one by faith,<sup>16</sup> just as I disagree with C. I. Scofield's statement: “As a dispensation, grace begins with the death and resurrection of

Christ. . . . The point of testing is no longer *legal obedience as the condition of salvation*, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as a fruit of salvation.”<sup>17</sup> (One is reminded of John Gerstner's quip that dispensationalists are legalists in the Old Testament and antinomians in the New Testament.)<sup>18</sup> There are not two ways of gaining eternal life, one in the prelapsarian era and one in the postlapsarian era, or one in the Mosaic era and one in the resurrection era. There is only one way of obtaining eternal life, and there has *always* been only one way.

I am especially troubled by the idea that eternal life in the prelapsarian era was something that man could, and must, *merit*. This is the view, and language, of Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline.<sup>19</sup> But I do not encounter “merit theology” in the Bible<sup>20</sup>—except perhaps as espoused by Judaizers and Pharisees, but there, of course, it is fervently condemned.

God threatened judgment if Adam and Eve disobeyed, but he did not promise eternal life as the *reward* for obedience.<sup>21</sup> I infer from this omission that they would have been granted eternal life on some *other* ground than their obedience. It seems to me that this ground is the unmerited favor of God. Eternal life, even in the prelapsarian period, was of grace, and not of merit. Faith and obedience were the *means* of gaining eternal life, but not the *ground*.

Of course, I realize that before the Fall, Adam and Eve did not need redemption or salvation in the way that they did, and the rest of us do, *after* the Fall. But to assert that they did not need redemption is not to assert that eternal life was not a gift, that it did not require grace. Nor is it to say—worse yet—that they could have merited eternal life. Man before the Fall was no sinner, but he was finite; he needed God's favor.

So, in theological language, the *ground* of eternal life in the prelapsarian era is the grace of God. What is its instrument and means? I believe that they are really no different than in the subsequent eras—faith in the Lord, accompanied by obedience, and, in fact, a faith that is itself an act of obedience. This faith is a gift of God, and it is not something that can merit eternal life—in any era. If we wish to simplify this

arrangement, we may employ the words of the old hymn, "Trust and Obey."

*Jesus' obedience.* Now, this conviction relating to the prelapsarian era has specific implications for the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup> If eternal life is not something that Adam merited, and if it is not something that man could even conceivably merit (Galatians 3:21),<sup>23</sup> it is not, therefore, something that Jesus Christ himself merited.<sup>24</sup> There is simply no such thing as a meritorious basis of eternal life, and there is no such thing as a meritorious soteriology. It is simply a fiction.

Do not misunderstand: in union with Christ by faith, all of his righteousness becomes ours (1 Corinthians 1:30). We obtained all of his law-keeping righteousness, because he has fulfilled all righteousness for us (Matthew 3:15; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21). But this righteousness is simple faith in and reliance on his Father and the obedience that constitutes it and flows from it.<sup>25</sup> So, eternal life was not something that Jesus was "rewarded" for being extraordinarily virtuous. He was a humble, obedient son (John 5:30; 8:29); and he was faithful in his humble obedience where Adam failed (Romans 5:12-21). The righteousness that becomes ours as we are mystically united to him by faith alone is a love-filled, law-keeping righteousness: a faithful trust and reliance on the Father that necessarily issues in good works.

If, however, we insist that eternal life is in its essence something that man merits, as Rome did, we may slowly drift (as, in fact, Rome has) into a synergism that sees man as contributing to his own salvation.<sup>26</sup> In fact, as Norman Shepherd observes, "[I]f we do not reject the idea of merit, we are not really able to challenge the Romanist doctrine of salvation at its very root."<sup>27</sup> Traditional covenant theology tries valiantly to avoid this error by claiming that Christ as man did the meriting, so sinful man need no longer merit as he once had to in the Garden of Eden. So, while all of God's benefits to man today are gracious, eternal life is fundamentally *achieved* by merit and not *bestowed* by grace. It is just that Jesus, not sinful man, now does the meriting.

It seems to me that this makes Christ something of an

afterthought in God's plan for man's gaining eternal life.<sup>28</sup> Christ is no longer really the Lamb slain from the world's foundation (Revelation 13:8). He is, rather, an instrument to get something more ultimate than him: merit. Merit and justice, not Jesus, becomes ultimate. This I judge to be a serious error.

In the Garden, the man and woman would be granted eternal life by the grace (or unmerited favor) of God. They were called to faith and obedience—there was no need for redemption (of course), but there was still need for grace and faith and obedience. "Trust and Obey."

#### THE POSTLAPSARIAN ERA

*Noah.* But what about the postlapsarian (post-Fall) era? "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8), and yet Hebrews implies that he would never have been converted or spared had he not acted out an obedient faith (verse 7).

*Abraham, Paul and James.* Later, God sovereignly chose Abraham and his seed. We learn from Romans and Galatians that Abraham was justified, or declared judicially righteous,<sup>29</sup> by faith and not by works. In James, however, we read that he was justified by works and not by faith alone. It is not necessary, in my opinion, to reconcile Paul and James by resorting to the notion that the justification of which Paul speaks is different from the justification of which James speaks.<sup>30</sup> Nor, in a variation of this argument, is it necessary to assert that Paul referred to Abraham's justification before God, while James referred to Abraham's justification before men. Rather, I believe that it is the same justification in each, Paul and James simply emphasizing different aspects of that justification.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that the Bible sometimes speaks a lot more loosely and generally than we would prefer, and this justification issue (I believe) is one of those cases. Neither Paul nor James is furnishing a theological definition of justification; each is writing passionately and pastorally, not scholastically and theologically.

Now, some of us tend to prefer *precise* theological categories, *precise* systematic theology, *precise* formulations, *precise* confes-

sions, and so on, as if there were some inherent virtue in precision. There is not.<sup>32</sup> The Bible is an infallible, but often a rather imprecise, Book; and we are likely to misunderstand it if we try to press its teachings into precise categories at all points. In any case, the fact that the Bible is sometimes imprecise means that there is no *inherent* superiority in precision, even theological precision.

Let me suggest, therefore, that Paul is attacking spurious works, while James is attacking spurious faith; and both are relating faith and works to justification in different pastoral contexts. Paul is attacking those (as in Galatians) who taught that Jewish ethnic codes are essential to justification. Wrong, Paul asserts. Justification is all about the justification of the Gentiles, of the expansion of God's redemptive purposes to include believers throughout the entire earth.<sup>33</sup>

The context in Romans is not identical, but there are basic similarities: anybody who thinks "good works," even the good works of the Old Testament law as some sort of moral code, can save, is badly mistaken. Christ alone saves, and those who place faith in him will obey the law. This, I believe, is the meaning of Romans 2:13: that not the hearers of the law are justified, but the doers of the law are justified. Paul is not setting up a theoretical basis of justification, but an *actual* basis of justification, and he notes in the last few verses of chapter 9 that those who understand the Old Testament law recognize that it sets forth a righteousness of *faith*, not a righteousness of some sort of good works abstracted from Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> So, Paul is attacking spurious works.

But James is attacking spurious *faith*. Can faith without works save?, James asks. It cannot. The idea of a faith without works is a contradiction of terms. Faith and works are united like the sun and its rays. James seems to have no worries that some Christian may pervert his assertion into a form of legalistic salvation. Like other early believers, James presumably knew that salvation is totally by the grace of God on the basis of the work of Christ. He also knew, however, that there is no such thing as a disobedient faith and therefore he could assert with the greatest force that justification is *not* by faith alone

(James' statement, not mine, 2:24). James is not setting forth precise theological categories; he is setting forth divinely inspired, pastoral truths. In the language of Rushdoony, we can separate things in analysis that we cannot separate in life.<sup>35</sup> This is one of those cases.

So, moving back into the history of the Old Testament, Abraham was saved solely by the grace of God, and the "instrumental cause" of his eternal life was faith *alone*, as long as we understand that the faith by which he was alone justified is never *alone*. It is an active, obedient faith; and if it is not an active, obedient faith, it is not true faith. I contend that had you suggested to the writer of Hebrews 11 that obedience is merely the *result* of faith, he would have looked at you without comprehension.

*Moses and the Law.* And what about the Mosaic economy? Was it something of a republication of a covenant of works?<sup>36</sup> Shall we say with C. I. Scofield that even the Mosaic law as a mere system of moralistic law-keeping (apart from Jesus!) was a "condition of eternal life" in the Old Testament period, as though salvation was in something or someone other than Jesus Christ? Of course not.

Well, we must ask again, did the Mosaic law present two ways of salvation, one, flawless law-keeping, and another trusting in Christ alone for salvation? Again, of course not. Paul tells us in Romans 10:6-9 that Deuteronomy 30 teaches that the law is not some requirement of extraordinary, meritorious virtue, but that it is near us, right next our hearts. It is something that by the grace of God, we *can* obey.

Of course, we cannot obey it apart from the work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, but that was no less true in the Old Testament than it was in the New Testament.<sup>37</sup> In Exodus 19 we read of the formalization of the Mosaic covenant. How can we summarize it? Simply, trust and obey (verses 5-8)—the same essential scheme as in the Garden of Eden, though, of course, now adapted to man's sinful condition.

We know from Hebrews that the same gospel preached in the New Testament era was the gospel preached to the Jews in

the wilderness, but since their response was not governed by faith, they were condemned (Hebrews 4:2). The basic substance and requirements of the gospel in the Mosaic economy were not different from those preached to the recipients of Hebrews.

*Sacrificial system.* The sacrificial system was an essential component of the Mosaic economy. This meant (among other things) that holy law-keeping included trusting in the Redeemer to come, confessing one's sins, and gaining (temporary) relief by the blood of bulls and goats, which prefigured Christ's blood-shedding on the Cross. In other words, there was not some revelation of salvation and eternal life *apart from* the law and its requirements.<sup>38</sup> There were not two ways of salvation in the law—one that said, "Trust in the Redeemer who is to come," and another one that said, "Obey the law." To trust in the Redeemer who is to come *was* to obey the law, and to obey the law *was* to trust the Redeemer who was to come. "Trust and Obey."

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT ERA

And then we come into the New Testament era. Again and again we hear Jesus Christ urging faith, belief in himself as the only means of salvation and eternal life (John 8:24; 11:25-26; 14:1, 11). He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except by him (John 14:6).

*The Pharisee and the Publican.* Jesus offers a parable to those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others" (Luke 18:9). The Pharisee proudly thought that his abstemious virtue would stand him in good stead before God; but it was the Publican, humbled, who smote upon his chest, and uttered, "God be merciful to me a sinner" who "went down to his house justified" (verses 13-14).

*The wealthy young ruler.* Yet when the wealthy young ruler approached Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16), Jesus responded, "Keep the [Mosaic] commandments." Does this not sound like the very thing he condemned in the parable of the Pharisee and publican, the former trying to "keep the commandments"? By no means.

Anybody who knew the Old Testament *rightly* also knew that keeping the commandments entailed humbly trusting in the Messiah, the one to come, and not relying on one's own works (Romans 9:30-33).

Some argue that Jesus was offering the wealthy young ruler some *theoretical* plan of salvation in order to drive him to despair and to trust in Jesus.<sup>39</sup> If so, Jesus missed a golden opportunity to tell the simple truth. However, if "keep the commandments" simply means trusting in Christ with an active, obedient faith (there is no other kind), we can largely resolve this apparent problem.

*The great commandment of the law.* When Jesus himself was asked what the great commandment of the law was, He replied, "It is to love the Lord God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind" (Matthew 22:37). This is not fundamentally different from the message of the gospel, because if one loves God with all of his heart, will he not also love God's son and trust in him (Psalm 2:11-12; Matthew 11:27-28; John 5:19-24)?<sup>40</sup> Of course he will. The heart of the law is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Forgiveness and eternal life.* And when Jesus declared that if we do not forgive our brother in our hearts, God will not forgive us (Matthew 6:14-15), was he undermining Paul's idea that men are not justified by good works? No. A regenerate faith in Christ alone is one that will necessarily forgive a fellow Christian for his offenses. Jesus was not teaching a different message from the prelapsarian era or from Moses or from Paul. His message was simple: "Trust and Obey." If you do not forgive your brother, then your faith is spurious; you will not be justified on that Final Day of Judgment (Romans 2:13-15).

*Paul.* And then there is Paul's theology (or, rather, pastoral exhortation). He tells us flatly that salvation is "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The idea that one can separate good works from faith in Christ, and boast of his good works, is repugnant. We are created in Christ Jesus *unto* good works, he tells us; but no one is saved on account of his works, any more than he is saved on account of his faith.



Then Paul tells us that only those who “continue in the faith” can expect to receive eternal life (Colossians 1:23). If we abandon that faith, we cannot expect to be saved. In Romans 11 he warns the new Gentile churches that, while they have become God’s elect covenant people as a consequence of Israel’s apostasy, he will cut them out of the covenant, just as he cut Israel out of the covenant, if they apostatize. Covenant election requires covenant faithfulness.

### A RESOLUTION TO THE GOSPEL-LAW TENSION

It is in the New Testament, in particular, that we encounter the apparent conflict between gospel and law. Gospel is generally defined as the good news of salvation on the basis of Christ’s redemptive work. Law is usually defined as God’s rigorous requirements for man that have nothing to do with gospel, but which man, after his salvation, may be able to mostly keep by the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, the gospel is invitation, while the law is obligation.<sup>41</sup> This was Luther’s view, and particularly Lutheranism’s view, as set forth in the Book of Concord. The Book of Concord (Article 5) even declares it is possible to preach the cross without preaching the gospel, because the cross requires repentance, and repentance is an obligation and therefore not a part of the gospel. This keeps gospel and law as separated as East is from West.

*Invitation and obligation.* I believe this notion is badly mistaken. When Paul declared that his message (his gospel message) was an odor of life unto life and death unto death (2 Corinthians 2:15-16), notice that he does not find it necessary to haul in “the law” as a *separate* category to convict men as a prelude to this gospel preaching.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the gospel itself sufficed to condemn impenitent hearts. In simple terms, the gospel itself contains obligation. And (I would add) the law contains *invitation*.

Paul makes this very plain in Romans 10 where he quotes Deuteronomy in supporting his view that justification is solely by faith in Christ. The law contains good news, and the gospel contains bad news. The law and the gospel *both* obligate, and the law and the gospel *both* invite.

*Fundamental Unity.* This means, when you boil it right down, that there is no fundamental distinction between gospel and law. Now, these words have been used for so long to communicate theological definitions that I am not advocating abolishing them, but we do need to understand that the *theological* definition given to gospel and law are quite often *not* the *Biblical* definition.<sup>43</sup> To those who believe that the law is only a whip to compel sinful men to obedience, how can we explain David’s exultation in Psalm 119 that the law is his delight, his love, his food, and his liberation? How can we explain Psalm 19, where we learn that the law “convert[s] the soul” (verse 7)?

Now it is true that Paul tells us in Galatians 3 that the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. To those who do not believe, it condemns. Before faith comes, we see in the law only a condemnation. But this is no less true of the gospel. Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians 1 that Jesus will one day return in flaming vengeance to wreak judgment on all those who do not obey the gospel. This is why Paul could use the expression “the obedience of faith,” (a good translation<sup>44</sup>) twice in Romans (1:5; 16:26). The gospel is not only a message to be believed; it is a command to be obeyed.

Of course, sometimes the law (like the gospel) can be used illegitimately—and it becomes a yoke (Acts 15). The problem here was similar to the problem in Galatians—the requirement that one be circumcised in order to be saved (15:1). The Pharisees had transformed the law of Moses into a tedious, laborious burden. This perversion of the law the Jerusalem council soundly repudiated.

*The “works of the law.”* But what about those statements, notably by Paul, that contrast the faith of the gospel and the works of the law (Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 11-12)? It comports remarkably with Paul’s argument to interpret most of these uses as referring not to the revelatory law of Moses, but to the Pharisaic and Judaistic misinterpretations of the law by Paul’s opponents.<sup>45</sup> Paul’s negative comments about the law are almost always set in a polemical context, and there was no word group in Greek to designate “legalism,” “legalist,” or

"legalistic."<sup>46</sup> If Paul can confirm the authority of the law and advocate its life-giving character in the very contexts in which he distinguishes law from grace (Galatians 6:1, 14; 6:2; Romans 7:6-14), the most natural way to understand him is to see him contrasting a false from a genuine view of the law, and a submissive relation to the law from a sinful relation to it.

In Galatians the expression translated "works of the law" appears four times. It never appears in a positive light. It is set in sharp contrast with "the hearing of faith" (2:16; 3:2; 3:5). So, does "works of the law" denote the genuine commands of the Old Testament law, commands that have nothing to do with eternal life, commands that, if one reads and obeys them, will draw him *away* from Christ?<sup>47</sup> This is not merely inconceivable; it is silly. As Daniel P. Fuller writes:

[T]he law presented at Sinai was one of faith, with essentially the same content needed for salvation as the message people received in the New Testament times.<sup>48</sup>

In Romans 9:30-33 Paul states that unbelieving Israel did not seek righteousness by faith in Christ but by the "works of the law." Significantly, however, he clearly implies that they could have discovered the truth of faith-righteousness in the law of Moses, the revelatory law. This means that "works of the law" denotes not the revelatory law, but a perversion of the law by the self-righteous, a law without Christ.

This is not what the Old Testament taught. Read properly, the Old Testament teaches (in anticipatory form) salvation solely in the redemptive work in Jesus (Romans 10:4). Old Testament law is, therefore, not a legalistic code. It is a code of holy conduct that includes at its very heart the revelation of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus apart from human merit or "good works" or any other human activity in which man can boast.

So, the contrast in Paul is never between the Mosaic law, properly understood, and salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Rather, the contrast is between a perversion of the law, transforming it into a legalistic code apart from Jesus, and a

proper understanding of the law, a gospel message of faith in the Redeemer and obedience to him.

This is why we read that remarkable statement in Romans 3:21, "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." The revelatory law *itself* attested that righteousness is not by law-keeping, that is, a sort of moralistic code into which many Jews fell. This revelatory law Paul calls a "law of faith" in verse 27. The problem is *not* the Mosaic law; the Mosaic law, if properly kept, does not lead away from Christ—it leads to and reveals Christ. And those who understand and keep that law will trust in Christ alone for salvation; and as his disciples, they will obey him.<sup>49</sup> "Trust and Obey."

We then can understand why C. van der Waal can write in his penetrating work, *The Covenantal Gospel*: "The law was not outside of Christ, for the law and the gospel are not contradictory concepts, but, rather, interchangeable.<sup>50</sup>" Not two laws, not two ways, not two means of justification—one holy gospel and law that tell man in whom he must trust, and whom he must obey.

#### THE CENTRAL FAITH OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

One big reason, in my view, that we go wrong in the gospel-law issue is that we tend to see the Bible's main message as one of individual soteriology: "How can I be saved?" Luther surely seemed to hold this view. He was plagued by a bad conscience. "How can a man be just before God?" But it is not clear that this is the chief question the Bible is trying to answer.<sup>51</sup> Luther was convinced it was, though, and his followers transformed his own existential battles into a soteriology and even a hermeneutic. Lutherans today see the distinction between gospel and law at the *heart* of the Christian faith, and they perceive justification by faith alone as the organizing principle of Christian theology and the faith itself.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, the central message of the primitive Church as found in the Bible was the Lordship of the risen Christ.<sup>53</sup> Individual soteriology is a crucial aspect of the exercise of this Lordship, but Lordship is much larger than individual soteriology.

It is not God's sovereignty as such, but his sovereignty as it comes to the fore in the Lordship of Christ, that is central in the Bible.<sup>54</sup> Both grace and obligation, gospel and law, blessing and judgment, are aspects of that single, unified message of Christ's Lordship.

Steve Schlissel is correct, therefore, when he declares that the chief question of the Bible is not, "What must I do to be saved?" (vital, to be sure), but rather, "What does the Lord require?"

### COVENANTAL UNITY

A Biblical way of explaining the cohesion of gospel and law, a single, Biblical message, is to refer to *covenants*. Here, I believe, the Westminster Confession is entirely correct in declaring that covenant is the means by which God relates to his people (chapter 7, section 1). In the Bible, the covenant is used to establish a sacred agreement, secured by oath (an often a bloody oath). It has two parties. God himself sovereignly administers covenants between God and men.<sup>55</sup> For our purposes, it is essential to understand that virtually *all such covenants are bilateral*. This is to say, that each party bears obligations and derives benefits. The negative dimension of this assertion is that, with the possible exception of the Noahic rainbow covenant, *there are no unconditional covenants in the Bible*. If Adam obeyed, he was blessed; if he disobeyed, he was cursed. If Abraham remained among his kindred in Ur, he would be judged as a heathen; if he departed, he would be the father of many nations. If Noah built an ark, he and his household would be saved; if he did not build an ark, he would perish with the wicked. If Israel trusted God and remained true to the covenant, she would be blessed both materially and immaterially; if she broke the covenant, she would be cursed. If David's royal seed remained faithful on the throne, God would preserve and prosper them; if they committed idolatry and otherwise apostatized from God's covenant and law, He would remove the throne from David's house. If the Gentiles continue in faith, God will bless them in the olive tree of his covenantal provision; if they do not continue in faith, he will cut them off

and judge them as he did ethnic Israel.

The same is abundantly true in individual soteriology—election is unconditional, but the covenant is *never* unconditional. Men cannot expect to be justified on the Final Day if they do not repent, believe, and obey. To preach that the covenant is unconditional is to preach an antinomian gospel, false to its very core. There will be no salvation without repentance, faith and obedience. An antinomian gospel is no less dangerous than a gospel that avers that men's merit or virtue or good works can somehow stand them in good stead with God. Both antinomianism and moralism are *false* gospels.

Individuals are saved entirely on the ground of Christ's vicarious death<sup>56</sup> and victorious resurrection,<sup>57</sup> which is the central tenet of the gospel.<sup>58</sup> They appropriate union with Christ (and its benefits like adoption, justification, forgiveness, and sanctification) by faith alone. This faith is an active faith (Hebrews 11), a faith that works by love (Galatians 5:6), a faith that *includes* faithfulness. Salvation is totally the work of God operating in Christ. It is monergistic to the core. But as a covenantal arrangement in history, it is bilateral.<sup>59</sup>

Yes, there is expanding revelation in redemptive history, but there is from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 one gospel, one law, one hope, one grace, one justice, one love, one mercy, one salvation.

This is the covenant message of God to his people in every era of human history.

"Trust and Obey"—not "gospel and law"—is the most accurate shorthand for the biblical conception of salvation.<sup>60</sup>

### Author

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## Notes

1. For an incisive introduction from a pastoral perspective, see John H. Armstrong, "Christians Aren't Perfect, Just Forgiven," *Viewpoint*, Volume 3, Number 4 [October-December, 1999], 1, 9.
2. Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964).
3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1984).
4. Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1883).
5. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), chapter 5.
6. Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
7. Theology by its very nature bears the marks of its age; it cannot—and should not—be otherwise. Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1992), 115.
8. Jürgen Moltmann, "Theologica Reformata et Semper Reformanda," in David Willis and Michael Welker, editors, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 122-25.
9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963 printing), I:1, 118-19.
10. Ned B. Stonehouse, "The Infallibility of Scripture and Evangelical Progress," in Ronald Youngblood, editor, *Evangelicals and Inerrancy* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 24.
11. James Brown, *Subject and Object in Modern Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 12.
12. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 38.
13. This in no way suggests that sound theology cannot participate in objective truth. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality & Evangelical Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock [1982], 2003), chapter 1.
14. W. Wilson Benton, Jr., "Federal Theology: Review for Revision," in W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd, editors, *Through Christ's Word* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 180-204.
15. For penetrating criticisms of the covenant of works notion, see Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1966), 214-26.
16. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:117-18.
17. C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 1115, emphasis supplied.
18. See his *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991). This work contains some excellent insights,

- though in my view it occasionally overreaches. There is plenty of polemics, but unfortunately very little irenics.
19. Meredith G. Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack," *The Upper Register* on-line, [http://www.upper-register.com/ct\\_gospel/ct\\_under\\_attack.html](http://www.upper-register.com/ct_gospel/ct_under_attack.html).
  20. James B. Jordan, "Maturity, Not Merit," Center for Cultural Leadership on-line, <http://www.christianculture.com/cgi-local/npublisher/viewnews.cgi?category=3&id=1038912130>.
  21. I am comfortable with the formulation of Roger Wagner, "Ethics and Covenant," Center for Cultural Leadership on-line, <http://www.christianculture.com/cgi-local/npublisher/viewnews.cgi?category=3&id=1039024296>.
  22. On the implications of the centrality of grace (as opposed to merit) for the doctrine of the atonement, see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1931).
  23. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Law as God's Gracious Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness," in Wayne G. Strickland, editor, *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 190-92.
  24. Contra Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 214.
  25. D. W. B. Robinson, "'Faith of Jesus Christ'—a New Testament Debate," *Reformed Theological Review* 29, Number 3 [September-December 1970], 71-81.
  26. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1960 edition), 264-69.
  27. Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2000).
  28. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988 printing), IV:1, 66.
  29. Justification is a judicial term, a legal (but not moralistic) declaration of righteousness. For an extensive etymological and exegetical discussion, see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960 edition), chapters 7-8. But for a different line of evidence relating the communal and existential dimensions of justification, see Don Garlington, "A Study of Justification by Faith," *Justification: Modern Reflections — (Reformation and Revival Journal, Volume 11, Number 2 [Spring 2002])*, 55-73.
  30. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 22:314. He believes that James is merely pointing out that "good works are always connected with faith." Why then does James bring in the issue of justification? It would be possible to prove that "good works are always connected with faith" without trumpeting that Abraham was not justified by faith alone.
  31. Alister E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 31.

32. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 225-26.
33. On this dimension of justification, see N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chapter 7.
34. Daniel P. Fuller, "Gospel and Law Identical!", *Christian Culture*, (February, 2003), 2, 4.
35. R. J. Rushdoony, *Hebrews, James & Jude* (Vallecito, California: Ross House, 2001), 163.
36. The Old Testament "denotes the covenant of works or the moral law given by Moses—the unbearable burden . . . of legal ceremonies being added, absolutely and apart from the promise of grace," Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1994), 2:234.
37. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 230-35.
38. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 115-19.
39. John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists* (volume 2), in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 16:394-95.
40. Oscar Cullmann suggests that New Testament Gentiles came to grasp the Trinity by means of the deity of Christ, not vice versa. See *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 40, 52.
41. According to Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper, they are "opposites." See his *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 228-35.
42. Robert S. Rayburn, "The Contrast Between the Old and New Covenants in the New Testament," (doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1978), 146.
43. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey; P&R Publishing [1987], 2001), 74-79.
44. "[T]he obedience which consists in faith," John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 1:13.
45. Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), chapter 4. For answers to critics, see his "The Gospel and Law: A Syllabus," Fuller Theological Seminary, 1988.
46. *idem.*, "Paul and 'The Works of the Law,'" *Westminster Theological Journal*, 38 [1975-1976], 28.
47. This is the sentiment of Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951), 1:259-69.
48. Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 350.
49. Daniel P. Fuller, "Only Disciples Are Saved," Berean Corner On-line, <http://www.fuller.edu/ministry/berean/disciple.htm>.
50. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance, 1990), 62.

51. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78-96.
52. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), 112.
53. Oscar Cullmann, "The Kingship of Christ and the Church in the New Testament," *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 105.
54. And in historic Calvinism, too. I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1983), 96.
55. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), chapter 1.
56. Leon Morris, *The Atonement* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1983).
57. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*.
58. Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 18-19.
59. Heinrich Bullinger, *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God*, in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 99-138.
60. I am indebted to John M. Frame for his constructive criticism of this essay. I alone, of course, am responsible for its content.